

The importance of natural forest ecosystems to human well-being cannot be overstated. Forests provide raw materials for food, fuel and shelter. In forests, ecosystem components such as microorganisms, soils and vegetative cover interact to purify air and water, regulate the climate and recycle nutrients and wastes. Without these and many other ecosystem goods and services, life as we know it would not be possible. —United States Forest Service

The United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service administers the 1.8 million-acre George Washington and Jefferson (GW-Jeff) National Forests in Virginia. This National Forest constitutes nearly 50 percent of the public outdoor recreation land in the Commonwealth. The Forest stretches the length of the western portion of the state and has acreage in 31 western counties.

Findings

- The National Forests are managed for multiple uses and sustained yield. This means that all approved uses will be accommodated to the capacity of the land to support these uses without degradation.
- Recreation use on the GW-Jeff National Forests for calendar year 2006 was estimated at 1.37 million visits.
- The 1.8 million-acre GW-Jeff National Forests provides dispersed recreation opportunities.
- The 17 designated wilderness areas on the GW-Jeff National Forests provide the majority of wilderness opportunities in the state.
- The National Forests provide the only publicly managed motorized trails in Virginia.
- The GW-Jeff National Forests provides comprehensive equestrian trail systems with campgrounds, a range of trail types and lengths, and support facilities for horse riders.

Recommendations

The U. S. Forest Service (USFS) should:

- Continue to develop new partnerships to market recreational opportunities and rural economic development through tourism; work with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), Virginia's Blue Ridge Highlands Tourism, Inc., Shenandoah Valley Tourism Association, and the Virginia Tourism Corporation to develop regional and international marketing strategies to showcase Virginia's outdoor recreation opportunities.

- Retain manageable size parcels to avoid fragmentation on USFS lands.
- Continue to place program emphasis on areas designated by Congress such as the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, Mount Pleasant Scenic Area, and Wilderness Areas.
- Identify opportunities to exchange land that consolidates public ownership; and enhance access to the land and water resources of national forest lands.
- Study the potential for National Forest Scenic Byways to become part of the Virginia Byways system. The USFS should work cooperatively with local communities, the Virginia Departments of Transportation, Historic Resources and Conservation and Recreation to develop Virginia Byways that have historic, cultural, scenic and recreational themes.
- Continue partnerships with the Department of Historic Resources (DHR) to enhance the preservation of historic and cultural sites; interpretation of cultural, historic and natural resources; and exchanging cultural resource information with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO).
- Survey and protect natural heritage resources on national forest lands.
- Continue to plan for and develop outdoor recreational facilities compatible with National Forest objectives and that meet needs identified in the *2007 Virginia Outdoors Plan*.
- Facilitate the activities of guide services and outfitters who provide equipment and access to the backcountry areas of National Forests for persons who lack the gear, time or skills to access these areas on their own and incorporate education for backcountry skills.
- The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests should continue to work with the DCR to transfer management of New River Campground adjacent to the New River Trail State Park.



Cascade Falls in Giles County. Photo by USFS

George Washington and Jefferson National Forests

The USDA-Forest Service is the largest federal supplier of outdoor recreation in the nation. Recreation use on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests for calendar year 2006 was estimated at 1.37 million visits. The USFS has a strong commitment to meeting the recreation needs of forest users and they have intensified their management of outdoor recreational areas in an effort to increase the carrying capacity while protecting the resource. A focal point for outdoor recreation, the national forest lands are vital to satisfying the increasing demand for dispersed natural resource-based recreation opportunities. The forests also provide spectacular upland scenery, unique ecosystems, trails and many other nature-based recreation opportunities. A comprehensive forest roads system, the Blue Ridge Parkway and 2,000 miles of trails, including the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, facilitate easy access to the forest. The proximity of large urban areas promotes high volume urban escapes, and the more rural lands are the backyard playgrounds and tourism attractions for many smaller communities.

National forests differ from national parks and other federal lands in their management concept. The multiple-use sustained yield concept ensures the continued provision of forage, recreation, timber, water, wilderness and wildlife resources needed by this and future generations. Although the opportunities for outdoor recreation are extensive and the public demand for these opportunities is seemingly endless, the forests' capability to meet these demands is neither static nor endless. Visitor preferences can shift over time, and both changing financial limitations and environmental impacts must be considered. The recreation management objective of the USFS is to enhance public use and enjoyment of its land. National Forest wilderness areas provide unique primitive recreation experiences. Congressionally designated, these areas optimize the natural processes of the ecosystem with generally minimal human activity. There are 17 designated wilderness areas in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests with an additional 18 areas inventoried and found to have potential as wilderness areas or as additions to existing designated wilderness areas. Two of these areas, The Priest and Three Ridges were designated as Wilderness areas in 2000. The George Washington & Jefferson National Forests are the largest suppliers of primitive, backcountry recreational opportunities in Virginia. The designated wilderness areas ensure that these opportunities will be available for future generations.

In southwestern Virginia, the natural resources, especially national forests are major recreational destinations. The New River Recreation Area, adjacent to the New River in Carroll County, contains a campground and picnic area that complements the New River Trail State Park. This facility allows visitors direct access to the state park and to the river for hiking, bicycling, walking, fishing, tubing and boating. This facility also anchors the eastern end of the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail. Other significant recreation areas include the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, and the Mount Pleasant National Scenic Area.

These are divided into several ranger districts to help distribute management resources throughout the Forest. Each Ranger District offers its own unique variety of special places, recreational resources, scenic areas, and outstanding trails. A description of these resources is available for each Ranger District on the USFS web site. An abbreviated example for one district follows.



High Knob Observation Tower in the Clinch Ranger District of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. Photo by USFS.

Glenwood-Pedlar Ranger Districts

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/gp/index.shtml>

Situated in the picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains, the Glenwood & Pedlar Ranger Districts stretch over 223,000 acres from just south of Waynesboro, VA to just north of Troutville, VA. Recreation opportunities abound for visitors, ranging from a short day hike along a shaded stream to a week-long backpacking trip up and down rugged mountain trails. There are over 300 miles of hiking trails, including approximately 120 miles of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. The 65-mile Glenwood Horse Trail provides a variety of experiences for the horse enthusiasts, while the South Pedlar ATV Trail System is available to those wanting to ride their ATV's and dirt bikes.

Camping is available in the area as well as the opportunity to explore five wildernesses, St. Mary's, The Priest, Three Ridges, James River Face and Thunder Ridge. Also included in this district area is the Mount Pleasant National Scenic Area.

Special management areas

The National Forest also contains many special areas that have their own enabling legislation and special management direction. Examples of two of these follow.

Mount Pleasant National Scenic Area

http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/gp/recreation/trails/hiking/mt_pleasant/index.shtml

The Mount Pleasant National Scenic Area is located in the USFS Glenwood & Pedlar Ranger Districts. The area was established in the US Code under Title 16, Chapter 2, Subchapter II §545a. The 7,580-acre scenic area was established in 1994 within the George Washington National Forest. The Secretary of Agriculture administers the scenic area. As part of this designation, a management plan was developed for the area restricting new permanent roads and timber harvesting within the scenic area, except as necessary for control of fire, insects and diseases. Motorized travel is allowed on State Route 635 and on Forest Development Road 51. All other motorized travel is not permitted within the scenic area.

Mount Rogers National Recreation Area

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/mr/>

The Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (NRA) was established by Congress to help bring eco-tourism benefits to an economically depressed region of the state. Located near the Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee state line intersection, the NRA's developed campgrounds, extensive trail system, variety of recreation settings, and spectacular scenery attracts visitors from throughout the country. These visitors have contributed significantly to the economy of the region. As an example, the Virginia Creeper Trail, 16 miles of which lie within the NRA, has been a significant economic generator for the Town of Damascus which lies on the southern end of the Mount Rogers NRA.

Horseback riding in Mount Rogers' Crest Zone is rapidly out-pacing the carrying capacity of the trails and the fragile alpine ecosystem. The U. S. Forest Service conducted a 'Limits of Acceptable Change' analysis of the crest zone to determine the best combination of management actions to accommodate appropriate levels of recreational use and to protect the resource. Some actions that have been undertaken to provide alternatives to trail riding in the crest zone are the extension of the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail to the New River Trail State Park and the ongoing development of the East End Horse Trail complex that contains several campsites and staging areas.

Mount Rogers has the potential to be an even greater recreation magnet for the eastern United States. Unfortunately, because of limited funding it has never achieved its potential as envisioned by the enabling legislation.

Map IX-2. National Forest and Wildlife Refuges

